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AUTHOR Alexander, David
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ABSTRACT

Play is children's active involvement with the environment and the things in it. It is apparently enjoyable, voluntary, self-initiated, often social and a natural product of the processes of physical, social and cognitive growth. Play is also the context in which parents interact often and meaningfully with their children. But what do parents or families know, and need to know, about how to provision and facilitate children's activity and learning? Children's play is the lens through which parents can look to their child as a source of guidance concerning what to do with, for, and in support of the child as a rapidly developing organism. Educational, psychological and developmental theories have their place in completing anyone's understanding of learning, but parent child interaction is fundamentally nurturant and not instructional. Perhaps children's play activities with material things could be thought of as work occupations similar to adult work. Five patterns of play occupations can be identified in adults' recollections of play: the child as explorer, constructor, communicator, thespian, and athlete. With appropriate materials, the growth and development of children in these play occupations can be encouraged. The model of parent child interaction is very much an I-Thou-It model in which parents provide encouragement and suggestions for alternative possibilities with appropriate materials. (In conclusion, qualities of materials that support young children's play are listed.) (RH)

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PARENTS AT PLAY WITH THEIR CHILDREN

by

DAVID ALEXANDER, LECTURER
ELIOT-PEARSON DEPARTMENT OF CHILD STUDY
TUFTS UNIVERSITY
MEDFORD, MA 02155

(617) 628-5000 X3353

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David Alexander, Lecturer
Tufts University
Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study

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Parents at Play with their Children

What is play? Its definition has evolved and changed over time and now means so many different things depending on whom you're talking to or what you are reading and the particular context you refer to.

For the most part, play is children's active involvement with the environment and the things in it. Play is apparently enjoyable, voluntary, self-initiated, often social and a natural product of the processes of physical, social and cognitive growth. Play is also the context over which parents interact often and meaningfully with their children. Insight and knowledge of play may help parents to deepen the significance of their play with their children.

As a consequence of children's play, children acquire abilities and concepts on their own which are "part of their basic adaptive equipment, which they need to get along in the world as living creatures." (Elkind 1976) That must mean that children possess some system for processing information and learning about things which structures their play. Socio-biologists suggest that this learning system is genetically built into the behavioral patterns of the human species. This implies that we cannot help but learn because the learning system, thought of as a set of behavioral skills, is canalized in our maturation.

But what do parents or families know of how to provision and facilitate children's activity and learning? What do parents need to know? Their job is not to duplicate or replicate the school's

enculturation agenda. School readiness skills, those being the ones most parents are anxious about, will develop for the child over the course of a rich, caring relationship with material objects, adults and peers. Parents need to look, for the most part, at their child as a source of curriculum activity. Children's play is the lens through which parents can look to their child as a source of guidance concerning what to do with, for and in support of the child as a rapidly developing organism. Educational, psychological and developmental theories have their place in completing anyone's understanding of learning.

"The resolve to respond to one's child according to certain steps and procedures arrived at cerebrally-intellectually as it were...may work well on the first or even second occasion; but very often, even the strongest resolutions break down under the weight of what is (and should be) an emotionally loaded relationship..... The cool, calculating, ever reasoning...parent might be perceived by the child as indifferent." (Katz 1980) With technical procedures for interacting with children, the parent is put in a position of being too self-conscious, rational and intentional. Katz goes on to explain that "parental intentions are less explicit to parents themselves as well as to others, and are less formal, more global, more personalized in that they (the intentions) are held for their own individual offspring." Newson, in the Katz article, says "what gives play its reputed high value in children's learning derives from the spontaneous, casual and often random variations produced in many types of play. These variations provide information which the child operates on and transforms into meaningful contents of the mind."

If there is a universal learning system, and I believe there is, then children's play may be the universal activity system which structures, inspires, facilitates and complements the learning system. Substantiation for the fact that there is a universal activity system is found in Catherine Garvey's book entitled Play in which very early in the book she cites "If we look more closely (at play), we can discern patterns of amazing regularity and consistency." (Garvey 1977)

The literature of play includes long passages which attempt to differentiate work from play. Maybe children's play activities could be thought of as work occupations for which there are metaphors in the adult notion of work. I refer particularly to those adults and children who work with material things.

Consider for a moment Alison Uttley's account of her own childhood of play in a country environment of fields and trees found in the lovely little article entitled "Field Toys."

> "The fields were our toyshops and sweetshops, our market and our storehouses. We made our toys from things we found in the pastures. We ate sweet and sour food of the wild. We hunted from hedge to hedge as in a market, to find the best provisions, and we had our wild shops in corners of fields, or among the trees.
>
> "We picked green rushes from the little hollows by the springs. ....We stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact. The discovery of the pith, its texture, resilient and pliable, always gave me great pleasure. A bird's egg, a ribbon of pith from rushes, and an oxlip were treasures prized for their beauty.
>
> "From the pith we made pretty devices. We curled it into roses, little baskets, a purse with a handle, a doll's stool.
>
> "We picked the rye-grass, which we called 'Tinker, tailor grass,' and we counted the little ears to find out whom we should marry. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. We asked it, 'This year, next year, sometime, never.'

> "....Cowslip bells were a storehouse of honey for the human little bees, and so were the horns of the honeysuckle. Like the bees themselves we sipped and tasted and hovered about the meadows, wild and happy and free." (Uttley 1943)

Careful analysis of literature wherein adults recall their own play of early childhood and careful analysis of young children's play invariably reveals five amazingly regular and consistent patterns of activity....call them children's occupations if you will.

> The child as explorer. Children are seen investigating the environment and the things in it, motivated by curiosity, a sense of wonder and a need to know. Activity is concerned with, but not limited to, transforming things, observing things, and trying and testing things.
>
> The child as constructor. Children organize or transform things into part, wholes and products. Activity is concerned with, but not limited to, representing things by painting, drawing, shaping and forming, building, inventing and producing things.
>
> The child as communicator. Children use language concerning explored objects, constructed objects, acted out images or motoric activity as the currency of social interaction. The child expresses knowledge about things and events. It often takes the form of speaking, writing, drawing about the materials and events inherent in activity. It can be a child's attempt to clarify some sort of disequilibrium by asking questions or reading.
>
> The child as thespian. Children construct and dramatically represent reality as they understand it at that point in time. Imitation, role-playing, puppetry and dramatic activity are examples in this area.
>
> The child as athlete. Children use their muscles, body and motoric skills to enable explorative,constructive, communicative dramatic activity.

These play occupations are not neatly mutually exclusive. Few occupations are. Children explore at the same time as they construct; they are thespians while they explore and communicate. Interpreting or coding children's observed behavior using these headings is frustrating. The people best able to use these headings to label activity are the

children involved in activity. However, an analysis of Alison Uttley's recollection of her childhood play may give us insight into what appears to be play occupations on her part. As you will note, it's tricky business to differentiate the occupations of play implied in the brief passages quoted earlier. Let me try in order to illustrate what I think is a message for parents.

Alison Uttley, as:

Explorer:
- "We hunted from hedge to hedge as in a market,"
- "The discovery of the pith, its texture, resilient and pliable...."
- "We stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact."

Constructor:
- "We made our toys from things we found in the pastures."
- "...we stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact."
- "From the pith we made pretty devices. We curled it into roses, little baskets, a purse with a handle, a doll's stool."

Communicator and Thespian:
- "We picked the rye-grass, which we called tinker, tailor grass,' and we counted the little ears to find out whom we should marry. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. We asked it, 'This year, next year, sometime, never.'

Athlete:
- "We made,....We hunted....We picked....We stripped....We curled....we....hovered about the meadows, wild and happy and free."

Looking at the child as an explorer, one invariably finds activity concerning, but not limited to, transforming things, imitating things, observing things, and trying and testing things. The child as a constructor

invariably, but again not exclusively, represents things by drawing, shaping and forming, building things, inventing or producing things. It often takes the form of speaking or writing about the materials and events inherent in the activity. It can be imitation of activity gleaned from active observation. It can also be in the form of a child's attempt to clarify some sort of disequilibrium towards attaining comprehension.

The child as thespian communicates his or her notions of both reality and hopeful futures.

The child as athlete is found using the small and large muscles to enable the other four spontaneous activities.

By virtue of the nature of spontaneous activity, children learn quite a bit by the time they get into Day Care, Nursery or Kindergarten programs.

Young children's play is characterized by learning occurring at a more subtle level. When asked "What are you learning?", the child is not always able to answer and may be more likely to say "But, this is what I am doing!" I am constantly amazed at how many children see their own learning as having occurred because of other people's efforts. Learning from play takes place over an extended period of time. Growth and development of explorers, constructors, communicators, thespians and athletes can be encouraged by parents even though it's natural for the child. The materials the child uses become the vehicle for enabling the employment and development and refinement of these skills. The parent interaction model then is very much an I--Thou--It (Hawkins 1969) kind of model which parents have with children and the materials the children are attracted to.

The parent must have an enormous capacity for patient waiting and expectation. There is the quality of infinite variety in the child's play...always a more sophisticated level of skill ability and conceptualization to which the child can aspire. It is towards this next higher level of skill that the parent encourages each child. This encouragement is not training. There's no need for that. Nor is it necessarily quick in achieving results or predictable in advance.

Encouragement and suggestions for activity from the parent should complement the child's play and be advanced as alternative possibilities not as must-do activities or correct techniques. Maintaining the momentum of play is enabled by adding objects, experiences or challenges which are appropriate to the level of skill exhibited by the child at a given point in time. Parents' awareness of levels of skill and choice of objects, experiences or challenges need not be completely self-conscious.

There are some special things to remember about those materials which best support young children's play.

- Young children prefer experience with concrete materials rather than abstract experiences about concrete materials.
- The concrete material things in a given environment mediate the relationship between adult and child.
- Activity is enabled and inspired by a parent's acute awareness, love for, fascination with and reverence for a raw material which is also interesting to children.
- Children's spontaneous activity with a raw material creates a thread which weaves or stitches each activity to another. This enables knowledge gained by the child in one activity with a raw material to be brought to bear on another activity with the same raw material.
- Increasingly diverse and novel experiences with a given material lay down respectively more conceptual threads concerning that material, like a fish net through which fewer and fewer chunks of information escape.

. The best kinds of materials are those which can be used extensionally by the child. Extensional as opposed to intensional use refers to the quality the material has for being used in many, many ways.

. There are lots of extensional materials, yet they all have these qualities in common. For a given material it:

1. Exists in many forms, colors, weights, textures and states.
2. Can be changed, shaped or transformed by the child's actions on it.
3. Can be easily found or is commonly available in most settings.
4. Is often something children have preconceptions about that reflect the materials intensional use.
5. Invites and allows observation and experimentation.
6. Has attributes that can be labelled and talked about.
7. Is usually provocative enough to capture children's attention without an adult being present.
8. Unfailingly provides for increasingly sophisticated levels of operation and interaction by the child.

"Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted, on the one hand, with the eager, sensitive mind of a child and, on the other hand, with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge..... I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to <u>know</u> as to <u>feel</u>." So writes Rachel Carson in <u>The Sense of Wonder</u> as she recalls her years with her nephew in Maine. Her charge, my final charge, to parents who want <u>to be with children</u>, not in an instructional capacity but in a nurturing one, is to rediscover with the child the "joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in." This is not passive or self-conscious but active and instinctive....playful and spontaneous in its nature. For children and adults alike, play creates its own kind of order and knowledge.

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